Our Voices Are Strong

Lessons from Women’s, Girls’ and Trans People’s Self-led Organisations
Mama Cash

Each year, Mama Cash supports 100 or more courageous groups, organisations, networks and women’s funds that are led by women, girls and trans people. Our grantee-partners are at the forefront of the fight for the rights of those who have most often been ignored or excluded not only by society but also by many funders.

Defining Self-led Organisations

Self-led organisations are founded, led and staffed by people who are speaking for themselves about their lived experiences of stigma, violence and exclusion. These women, girls and trans people are acutely aware of the daily realities and challenges that they and others in their community face, and they are personally committed to creating meaningful change. Mama Cash supports people who have experienced stigma and exclusion to represent their own interests and needs, and to articulate and demand their own rights. We believe that social change resulting from self-led activism is deeper, more authentic, more responsive to core social injustices, and more likely to last.

Self-led Organisations Interviewed
(all interviews conducted by Sarah Duisters)

Aware Girls, Pakistan, strengthens girls’ and young women’s leadership skills through support groups and a counselling hotline.

Bilitis Lesbian and Bi-Women Resource Centre, Bulgaria, supports movement building among lesbians, bisexual women, and trans and intersex people.

EMPOWER Chiang Mai, Thailand, builds sex workers’ leadership and campaigns for the decriminalisation of sex work.

Insight, Ukraine, supports movement building from a queer feminist perspective among lesbians, bisexual women and trans people.

Malawi Human Rights for Women and Girls with Disabilities, Malawi, advocates for reproductive justice for disabled women and girls and against violence directed at women and girls with disabilities.

Pastoralist Girls Initiative, Kenya, builds leadership skills among Somali girls and young women living in the North Eastern province of Kenya.

Ponton, Poland, is a feminist sexuality education group that advocates for and provides comprehensive sexuality education for young people.

Red Flag Women’s Movement, Sri Lanka, builds the leadership and organising capacities of women workers on tea and rubber plantations and in the garment and domestic work sectors.

Sappho for Equality, India, creates safe spaces for lesbians, bisexual women and trans people by organising study circles, dialogues and film screenings.

Society without Violence, Armenia, raises girls’ and young women’s consciousness about violence and conflict, challenges sexist stereotypes and builds girls’ and young women’s leadership.

Tamilnadu Textile and Common Labour Union, India, is a women-led trade union organising and building the capacities of women garment and textile workers.

Women with Disabilities Development Foundation, Bangladesh, is a women with disabilities-led group advocating for the rights of women with disabilities and building their leadership capacities.

Women’s Health and Equal Rights Initiative, Nigeria, provides a platform to promote the well-being and protection of the rights of lesbian, bisexual and other sexual minority women in Nigeria through advocacy, education, empowerment, and psychosocial support.

Women’s Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy, Uganda, builds sex workers’ leadership and promotes sex workers’ rights.

WoteSawa, Tanzania, promotes psychosocial and legal support for girl domestic workers and advocates for their rights.

Credits

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This report is based on a Master’s thesis written by Sarah Duisters at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (the Netherlands, June 2015) entitled, “Addressing women’s rights: context-driven strategies, The relationship between the strategies of self-led women’s rights organisations and the obstructive context in which they operate”. Ms. Duisters interviewed representatives of fifteen self-led groups that have received funding from Mama Cash. Some of the material has been updated for this report. Mama Cash thanks Sarah Duisters for her research and permission to use her study and findings in the creation of this report. Her thesis is available online.

Design
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Cover photo: Ponton, Poland Photo: Daniel Gnap
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Introduction: Self-led groups coming together to advocate for inclusive change

After her mother died when she was 16, Angel Benedicto’s estranged father wanted her to marry immediately. Instead, Benedicto escaped to Mwanza, the city in Tanzania closest to her home. She was hired as a domestic worker, working upwards of 18 hours a day and earning only €7 per month.

“I did not even get time to rest and was abused, exploited and isolated by my employer,” shares Benedicto, who was seen as a servant without rights by her employer and the larger community.

As a teenager, a woman and a domestic worker, Benedicto was isolated and did not know where to seek support. Larger aid organisations and government programmes often don’t reach girls and women who are so disempowered in their communities. Refusing to accept being counted out, Benedicto eventually went on to form her own organisation – WoteSawa, meaning “all equal” – to become the voice for women and girl domestic workers in Tanzania: “It is my dream that I will see domestic workers respected like other workers… [and] that exploitation, low salaries and other forms of violence will not take place.”

No one better understands the silencing and exclusion that women, girls and trans people face than those who have lived the experience. And no one is better able to propose solutions that respond to these lived realities. Self-led organisations, like WoteSawa, are staffed by people from the community who are fully aware of the daily realities of their constituents and are personally invested in creating meaningful change. Simply put, self-led groups are organised and led by people who have historically been silenced and are now speaking for themselves.

Political scientists Fernando Tormos and Laurel Weldon have written in Inclusive Deliberation, Diversity and Solidarity in Transnational Social Movements (Purdue University, April 2016, Work in Progress): “…[A]utonomous self-organization aimed at articulating the views of marginalized groups is critical to ensuring greater inclusiveness.” Self-led groups are well placed to use their own experiences, and knowledge of the social norms and customs in their communities, to implement strategies that are likely to have long-term impact and secure greater inclusion and justice. These groups exhibit tremendous energy, creativity and sustained commitment to pushing boundaries to secure such change.

“Because our work is about changing the attitudes of the community and changing the culture with the community, it is very important for us to be seen as insiders: someone who comes from [the community] and who actually believes in empowering and developing the community,” comments Gulalai Ismail, who founded Aware Girls when she was 16 to help her peers exercise their rights in Pakistan.

The self-led groups funded by Mama Cash are often ignored, distrusted or even criminalised because of the ways they and their constituents are viewed by society. These groups work in contexts where women, girls and trans people are often
seen as incapable of enacting change, much less leading organisations that seek to change societal norms. People in positions of authority and others in the community may not see these women, girls and trans people as equals with valuable voices and solutions. Often they are not seen as deserving the same rights.

Using culturally specific messaging and strategies to navigate the local community, expanding bases of support, understanding how to protect at-risk programme participants and building activities tailored to the needs and advocacy agenda of the group – these are the skills that leaders of self-led groups have developed as members of their communities. But being a member of the community can also pose challenges. Raising contested and under-addressed issues with a clear agenda for change increases the visibility of women’s, girls’ and trans people’s self-led groups and as a result can heighten repression and even put their lives at risk. To protect themselves, their families and their peers and to advance their agendas, self-led groups use a variety of strategies to secure their human rights and leverage their experiences to catalyse change. Self-led groups know what it takes to change deeply held social norms, laws and policies, and access to and control over resources. They recognise that this work is an ongoing process, not a one-time intervention. Dedicated, resourceful and determined, these leaders know that deep and durable change will only result from work supported by vision, analysis and collective action, and they are committed to the process for the long-haul.

Funders like Mama Cash have directly observed the impact that self-led organisations have in transforming their communities. However, the ways in which these organisations operate – and how best to fund them – remains largely undocumented. This report shares a few of the key strategies and approaches used by self-led organisations run by women, girls and trans people and provides recommendations for funders interested in supporting their work. We highlight four key ‘takeaways’ illuminated by the research and conclude with four recommendations for funders interested in supporting self-led organisations.

Finally, Mama Cash notes with interest that the four takeaways in this report are aligned with programmatic (grantmaking) outcomes we are tracking in our current strategic plan. While this research was conducted before our current strategic plan was finalised, it is useful to see that what we learned from this research about self-led groups resonates with our current theory of change. Our theory of change holds that our support strengthens our grantee-partners in a number of ways that are important to securing long-term structural change. Our funding and accompaniment strengthen grantee-partners’ organisational capacities and support them to mobilise constituencies for change, to articulate political agendas and to collaborate and build stronger alliances. All of these elements surfaced as important aspects of self-led organising in the research discussed in this report. Mama Cash’s theory of change emerged from our last strategic plan and is being tested, explored and validated during the current strategic plan (through 2020).
Takeaway 1

Strengthen capacities

How do members of marginalised groups – for example, sex workers in Uganda or poor, adolescent girls in Pakistan – go about creating systemic change?

Building knowledge, skills and confidence

In Uganda, sex work is illegal, and sex workers are labelled criminals. Teenage girls without social class privilege in Pakistan are kept at home to help with household chores instead of continuing their education. How do people in these situations create change for themselves? How do they get others to take them, their rights and the change they propose seriously?

Many women, girls and trans people are excluded from formal education, not to mention the rooms where policies and laws are developed and decisions are made. They often lack the language skills, access to knowledge and confidence to participate in formal policy advocacy. Self-led groups are often not accepted as capable of creating change themselves, which makes it challenging to get people in positions of power and authority to listen. As a staff member of WoteSawa shares, “They are saying that you as a woman, as a domestic worker... you cannot have good ideas. I was a domestic worker and I am a woman, so how dare I sit around the table with lawyers and doctors?” Similarly, other self-led groups report that their publications are devalued and not seen as reliable or credible if they are not written or presented in established, formal formats.

Successful self-led groups view these challenges as opportunities. The fact that women, girls and trans people are the leaders of their own organisations creates opportunities to develop new skills. These skills equip them to implement programmes and develop successful human rights advocacy strategies. Capacity building within self-led groups ranges from building leadership and organisational management skills like fundraising, strategic planning and financial management to building their knowledge of local, national and international laws, policies and frameworks.

For example, Aware Girls is working to strengthen the leadership skills of young women so they may more fully participate in political activities and discourse. Girls are educated about human rights, including international human rights frameworks and local human rights mechanisms in Pakistan. “We are strengthening the advocacy and community mobilisation skills of young women so that they can advocate for their rights,” explains Ismail, founder of Aware Girls. After girls have a knowledge base, Aware Girls reaches further to create a bridge between young women and policy makers through the establishment of citizen committees. The goal is to increase the political participation of young women. Four times a year, Aware Girls holds dialogues with political parties and invites the public. This gives the young women members of the citizen committees an opportunity to speak directly to policy makers, and also presents an opportunity for the community to see young women speaking authoritatively and passionately on political issues. This, says Ismail, “creates a more conducive environment for the political and civic participation of girls and women.”

Self-led groups understand the importance of building their capacities and knowledge base as an initial step in preparing to mobilise a constituency base that is able to articulate shared interests and develop negotiating power. The self-led groups supported by Mama Cash know capacity building to be a vital investment in getting to the negotiating table, and to being taken seriously once there.

Successful self-led strategy

Create opportunities for group members and staff to increase their knowledge, build their confidence and strengthen their capacities to engage in human rights advocacy.
Takeaway 2

Engage with the community

The needs of people who have been pushed to the margins of their communities are often hidden or unacknowledged, as are violations of their rights.

Using dialogue and art to build bridges

The challenges that people who have been pushed to the margins face remain misunderstood and theirs alone; the larger society is often not aware of or is uninterested in tackling problems that do not seem to affect them directly. Having faced indifference for so long, self-led organisations know that one of the most effective strategies for securing their rights is to educate the community and open avenues for dialogue. Many groups find that focusing their advocacy at the local level is an effective first step.

Women’s, girls’ and trans people’s self-led groups face deep, ingrained discrimination from society, and it takes a lot of creativity and gumption to pull back the curtains of intolerance, taboo and stigma to reach and speak to the community. Creating opportunities for dialogue and engaging consistently over time with community leaders can succeed in challenging and changing societal beliefs about women and girls. Using constructive engagement strategies helps self-led groups strategically convey their messages to current power holders in their communities. Having long experienced unequal power dynamics, self-led groups understand intimately how power works and use this knowledge to intentionally focus their efforts on implementing constructive confrontation strategies.

Many self-led groups explicitly use culturally-specific messaging and strategies that challenge norms and behaviour that violate their rights, while also drawing on positive values of their communities to highlight how violence and prejudice are inconsistent with those values. Self-led groups use language, stories and metaphors that highlight past successes, core values and future hopes when meeting with various stakeholders.

Often communities, and especially leaders, are not willing to change the status quo to benefit a marginalised group (or groups) and are not open to sharing their power. Thus, self-led organisations know they must convince the broader community that social change will serve everyone’s interest. Malawi Human Rights for Women and Girls with Disabilities (MHRWD) uses street drama to grab the attention of community members as they are attending to their daily activities. Not dwelling on the challenges that women and girls with disabilities face, MHRWD uses a positive approach when connecting with the community. Through theatre, staff members show that by including women and girls with disabilities in the community, the number of disabled women and girls who are forced to beg will decrease, thus benefiting the community. “Little by little, people are changing their attitudes towards women and girls with disabilities because of the kind of awareness we’re giving [through] our dramas,” says a MHRWD staff member.

Sappho for Equality, based in India, has similarly found that putting on their annual Calcutta International LGBT Film & Video Festival, now in its eighth year, is an effective, engaging and fun way to reach large groups of people in the community. “It’s a very useful strategy for interfacing and dialoguing [... about LGBTIQ rights and identity],” says Subhagata Ghosh. “Creating safe spaces, like film festivals, where stakeholders can explore their own and others’ positions and interests from a position of curiosity is important; it creates a more informed and knowledgeable public, fosters cooperation among stakeholders and develops effective public policy.”

Self-led groups often contend with a lack of political interest in their issues when they are working to influence the agenda. In the face of these types of obstacles, self-led groups reach out in creative ways with messages that resonate with the wider community to advocate and create social change. This requires self-led groups to be tenacious and invest energy in convincing, negotiating and compromising, but it is a proven and successful strategy.

Successful self-led strategy

Build bridges and engage the community through shared values, culturally specific messages and creative media and art forms like accessible street drama and film.
Takeaway 3

Convince stakeholders and shape agendas

Another effective strategy used by self-led groups is to create allies by showing that advancing the interests of their constituents is in the wider interests of a community or even the nation.

Getting governments, policymakers and the media on board

These activists implement strategies that not only realise benefits for the members of the self-led groups, but also for their families, communities and society. To do this requires convincing stakeholders, including governments, policymakers and the media, that recognising the rights of women, girls and trans people is beneficial for everyone.

The research conducted with Mama Cash’s grantee-partners also underscores that groups working on issues related to sexuality, especially LBTI1 and sex worker-led organisations, are thoughtful in engaging members of the local community where reactions to their advocacy are potentially intense because of the close relationships that are part of daily community life. These groups not only challenge the status quo on the position of women, but also go against heteronormative beliefs and models. Engaging the local community can be an intense experience, and sometimes LBTI and sex worker groups decide to first engage government, policymakers and the media as advocacy targets.

EMPOWER Chiang Mai has been working for the last 20 years to improve conditions for sex workers in Thailand. This long-term goal is supported by more immediate activities to develop relationships and greater understanding with important stakeholders – for example, changing how the Thai media perceives and reports on sex workers. The gradual change in attitude among reporters and the larger media “happened after many years of EMPOWER standing up every time to the media and saying: ‘No, that is wrong.’ For sure our image in the media has changed,” says an EMPOWER staff member. Challenging the stereotypical portrayal of sex workers in the media has contributed to the creation of a more realistic, human view of sex workers. The public now gets an image of people who are not only defined by the fact that they do sex work, and sees them also as friends, mothers and citizens. This helps to reframe the context of sex workers’ rights so the public sees it also as an issue of human rights.

EMPOWER Chiang Mai, Thailand Photo: EMPOWER

In Poland, Ponton, a group of young sex educators, has been working since 2002 to influence how students are taught sex education in Polish schools. Seemingly small successes have had a significant impact. When the young women of Ponton started their work, parental written consent was required for a student to attend sex education class. This extra hurdle kept many students out of the class, either because the parents actively disagreed with sex education or because the parents were indifferent, and not signing the consent form was the easiest course of action. “[O]ur reports about the state of sex education in the schools and at home in the family, about what young people need, and what young people are interested in, [have] shaped many debates”, says a Ponton staff member. The consistent dissemination of information on how sex education can benefit not only students, but also families and society, helped the government change its requirements. Now, a signed document is required only from parents when they do not consent to their child’s participation in sex education classes. This framing sets the expectation that all students should be included in sex education classes, as the government deems it important for all students’ learning and for the public good.

Successful self-led strategy

Engage a variety of stakeholders to shift and shape political agendas to contribute to change over the long-term.

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1 Lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex
Takeaway 4

Collaborate and create alliances

Women, girls and trans people who have been isolated from each other create strength and community by coming together in self-led organisations, building solidarity to replace separation.

Seeking civil society allies

Once an organisation is formed, though, it must join a larger civil society context and conversation to build its impact. Self-led groups find networking and developing relationships with partners and peer organisations to be one of their most challenging but vital strategies.

Arriving on the civil society landscape as small and relatively new organisations without long track records puts self-led groups at a disadvantage in contexts where other civil society organisations are more established and well-known. Some of these more mainstream organisations, often led by men or women from more privileged social positions, can view the emergence of new groups as competition for resources and may be reluctant to share their networks or contacts. Other established organisations may not view self-led groups as potential partners, assuming that self-led groups lack the skills, knowledge and know-how to advocate ably for their causes. Despite these challenges, self-led groups know that successful advocacy depends on strong relationships and being well networked. They are thus committed to building their networks and ready to try creative approaches to engage in network building.

Leveraging personal relationships as a first step has proven successful for the Society Without Violence in Armenia. “We are collaborating with women in our region who are leaders in their communities or are representatives of local government and who are very influential,” says a Society Without Violence staff member. By working to develop and strengthen personal relationships with decision-making women in the government sector, Society Without Violence believes it can improve the likelihood of successfully influencing the government to adopt a formal law against domestic violence and develop policies for the promotion of gender equality.

Insight, a self-led LBTQ group in Ukraine, has succeeded in engaging in policy advocacy at the national and international level, but they are also working to connect to larger movements. As members of a wider Anti-Discrimination Coalition, Insight members have become adept at confronting stereotypes. When other human rights organisations balk at working with Insight, “[We] just talk to them about the stereotypes [they hold] and ask them: Why don’t you want to work with us?” says an Insight staff member. Insight staff find that other organisations don’t always see the connections between LBTQ rights and human rights. “So we approach those organisations with links like gender equality,” continues the Insight staff member, “and then you start to discuss these gender topics, and they see that we have many things in common.”

When their networking efforts are successful, self-led groups create the links that bring people who have been excluded into relationships with policy makers and larger national and international women’s rights and human rights organisations. This contributes to bringing women’s, girls’ and trans people’s issues more to the centre in conversations within the community or society.

Successful self-led strategy

Leverage personal relationships and find common issues to build networks and alliances.
Conclusion

To secure their rights, women’s, girls’ and trans people’s self-led groups must employ a variety of strategies, which include building their own capacities, expanding their relationships in the local community, engaging new stakeholders, shaping agendas and building alliances.

On the local level, these groups use constructive engagement methods, which incorporate culturally-accepted values to ensure that their messages fit the experiences and daily realities of the communities where they live. They seek to engage local leaders in positive dialogue so as not to overtly challenge their power, but instead to enhance community cooperation and support for the activities of the self-led groups. Some self-led groups, especially those dealing with sensitive issues like sexuality, find it beneficial to directly engage government, policy makers and media to create change, noting that change only lasts if it is embedded in the society.

At both the local and national levels, self-led organisations know they must incorporate socio-cultural beliefs and practices into their work to facilitate connections and cooperation with their communities and government. Networking activities can create visibility and bring more support to self-led groups that often experience isolation in their own communities. Being part of coalitions opens up possibilities for cooperating with organisations and authorities that otherwise might not show interest in women’s, girls’ and trans people’s issues. Changes at all of these levels are important for increasing the influence of self-led organisations and securing change that expands rights and justice for their constituencies.
Recommendations for funders

**Fund appropriately**
Invest in core, flexible and longer-term funding and capacity support to help self-led organisations build and share their own visions of success. Support trainings that increase the skills and knowledge of self-led groups’ leaders and members, so they can further engage with local community members and leaders, and participate in advocacy locally and nationally.

**Foster movement building**
Support alliance and network building, and introduce self-led grantees to other organisations and movements that focus on similar issues. Fund self-led group members to attend women’s rights conferences and meetings where connections with other self-led and supportive organisations can be built and strengthened.

**Value self-leadership**
Recognise that you may have assumptions about the capacities of self-led groups. Self-led groups are often not taken seriously based on assumptions that since they may lack formal education, connections and visibility, they do not possess the skills necessary to enact change. Regardless of their level of formal training, Mama Cash’s grantee-partners show that self-led groups operate with considerable sophistication.

**Appreciate the nature of social change**
Recognise that the social change advocated by self-led groups, especially social norm change, takes time. As a result, for example, approaches to monitoring and evaluation will require flexibility and creativity. Self-led groups may sometimes need to ‘back off’ in response to backlash in order to ultimately succeed in the work of securing deep and lasting social change.